

Going Beyond the Gates: Sweet Briar's Work with the Outside
Community, 1927-1938

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Sweet Briar's Work With the Outside Community, 1927-1938

In the late 1920s, Sweet Briar College was just beginning its legacy of service and was busy building up its reputation in the community and the nation. This was at the beginning of the Great Depression when it was becoming increasingly difficult for many families to make ends meet, much less send their daughters to a small women's college. Despite this, many of the students were able to remain at school, and many more came to join the community. It was during this time of great difficulty that the students found the time to go out in the community and break the social tensions of that period.

It has been said that during this time, women's colleges in the South were severely "behind the times" in most every aspect. That because of the restrictions put on them in the student's social lives, the southern women's colleges became like finishing schools. It is true that many restrictions were put on the students of southern women's colleges during this era; to preserve what Amy McCandless calls the "pedestal". She describes the pedestal as the social ideal of the southern woman who was supposed to be meek and in need of shelter and protection. She says that many southern women's colleges put in place all these restrictions to "preserve the purity, beauty, and grace of Southern womanhood"¹. At Sweet Briar College, there were restrictions on how often and when the students could leave campus and under what circumstances they could leave, what time they had to go to bed, and other restrictions common to the time period;

¹ McCandless, Amy T. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women." *History of Higher Education Annual*, vol. 7 (1987): 45

such as they could not drink, smoke, or dance. McCandless explains this by saying that "to [the] administrators of southern women's colleges...a wholesome social environment was even more important than a stimulating intellectual atmosphere"². It is clear that in her eyes, the southern women's colleges are behind the northern women's colleges.

Despite all the evidence McCandless has, the question must still be asked whether or not this assumption applies to all southern women's colleges as she says. In the case of Sweet Briar, the students participated in many activities that went against the social norms of the time. These activities included working with children and people who had been outcast by society. Beginning in 1913, the students of Sweet Briar began making weekly visits to the Monocan Indian Mission, a group shunned and forgotten about by the rest of society because they were of mixed blood. And later in 1930, they expanded their activities at the Indian mission to include work at the black schools that had been ignored by the community. The students were not afraid of going beyond the norms of society and past the racial tensions of the time in order to do the things they thought were right.

In addition, the students of the Sweet Briar Young Women's Christian Association began teaching the maid staff of the college some elementary academic work. This was done despite the separation of the social classes and the social norm of the time. Thus the question still remains whether Sweet Briar College fit into McCandless' generalizations. It is not clear what the administration and faculty of Sweet Briar felt about these activities since the faculty meeting minutes for the years between 1912-1914 are missing. However, based on the restrictions that were in place at the time,

² McCandless 53

it appears that there was support from these groups since the students were permitted to regularly travel off campus in order to work at the schools.

Looking at the years between 1927 and 1938, one can see the bulk of all the work done at the various schools and with the maid staff, as this was the time the work was at its peak. By using the *Sweet Briar News*, the Sweet Briar College student handbooks, and the student activities bulletins, one can get a good sense of the accomplishments of the students of Sweet Briar at these locations and how it affected the recipients of the work. And more importantly one can begin to see how Sweet Briar is the exception to McCandless' pedestal.

In the 1913-1914 school year, the Sweet Briar chapter of the YWCA found a new group of people to help at the Monacan Indian Mission at Bear Mountain. The mission was a colony of mixed blood people of all races, who had been living in the mountains a few miles from campus long before Amherst County was founded in 1761. Throughout the years, the mission had become more and more isolated due to the discriminatory Jim Crow laws, which labeled the community residents as black, even though they were not. This fostered the mission's dislike of the blacks because they were wrongly grouped with them.

The mission community was left in their small mountain village, which was severely lacking in resources. As a result, the YWCA put together a group of students who hiked over to the mission once a week on Wednesdays to help alleviate the poor conditions³. The Sweet Briar students taught the girls of the mission simple sewing tasks,

³ Ed. YWCA, student handbook, 1914-1915, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

and taught the boys of the mission basket weaving ⁴. However, the students had many other plans for the future which included instituting manual training for the boys so that they could find work outside of the mission; procuring a second teacher for the mission school; and raising money to add on to the school building⁵.

However, the question still remains as to why the work was started at the mission in 1913 and, not earlier, since the mission was built by the Episcopal Church on the property by a Reverend Gray, in the late 19th century. Gray set up the mission, but left in 1910, leaving the mission community to their own devices. This was around the same time that the organizations at Sweet Briar were gaining their footing, and would have been looking for service projects. Therefore, one can make the assumption that it was in this year that they saw the need and had the resources and manpower to help.

The program at the mission continued throughout the First World War, and evolved little by little. By 1917 the Sweet Briar students had added on to the school as they had hoped, and had equipped it with basic kitchen equipment, which allowed them to begin teaching cooking to the students. They also expanded the school curriculum to include basic kindergarten work⁶.

However, in 1920, the work at the mission began to slow down. Because of distressing situations elsewhere in the community, the 1920-1921 Student Handbook stated that work at the mission would continue, but that they would be focusing more on

⁴ 1914-1915 Handbook

⁵ 1914-1915 Handbook

⁶ Briar Patch yearbook, 1918, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA

alleviating the distressing conditions in the larger community⁷. From that point on, news on the work at the mission becomes almost nonexistent.

It is not until a December 1927 issue of the Sweet Briar News, that there is any new information about the mission. In that issue an editorial appeared telling the students about the work being done at the mission and to encourage others to help⁸. It appears that their earlier plans to step back from the mission work did in fact come to pass, and that in 1927 the students were returning to the work at the mission.

However, it apparently took a few years to gain momentum and for the Sweet Briar students to make a full comeback at the mission. In the 1929-1930 handbook description of the mission work, we learn a little more about what the students were doing at the mission, and why the students were teaching at the mission school. Because of the beginning of the Depression and the worsening conditions throughout the entire nation, the needs of the mission were much greater. So much so that the mission community required basic needs such as clothes and provisions to help them get by⁹.

At this time, we also learn why the students were teaching in the school. Amherst County supplied the mission school with a teacher for six months out of the year, but for the other six months the teaching was left up to the Episcopal Church and the students of Sweet Briar¹⁰. Therefore, the church utilized the resources they had and let the students of

⁷ Ed. YWCA, student handbook, 1920-1921, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

⁸ "Help the YWCA," *Sweet Briar News*, 7 December 1927, 2.

⁹ Ed. Sweet Briar Student Associations, Student Handbook 1929-1930, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹⁰ 1929-1930 Handbook

Sweet Briar teach, as they were willing to come and interact with the children, despite what others in society might think.

However, by the end of the 1929-1930 school year, the work at the mission came to a screeching halt, and nobody knew whether or not the students were going to continue visiting the mission. In the spring of 1930, the mission burned down because of a small fire, and the YWCA was not sure whether they would be able to continue their work¹¹. It is not clear whether it was the school that burned or a significant part of the mission community was burned at that time. However, due to the lack of information on the work at the mission between 1930 and 1933, it can only be assumed there was enough damage that the students did have to abandon this line of work for the time being.

It is in 1933, that we once again see a report of the YWCA's work at the mission in the *Sweet Briar News*. Even though it is not stated, it can be assumed that the mission had been rebuilt, and the YWCA returned to the mission and the programs they had established there¹². After their three-year hiatus, the students found that the conditions at the mission were worse than ever before. The *Sweet Briar News* reported that the children desperately needed medical attention, but were unable receive it because of the discrimination¹³. They could not go to any of the hospitals in nearby Lynchburg for treatment, because the white doctors would not treat them, and they could not afford to have a private doctor come visit them¹⁴. As a result, the YWCA expressed hopes that a health fund could be established for the people of the mission so that they would be able

¹¹ "New President Appoints YWCA Cabinet," *Sweet Briar News*, 1 May 1930.

¹² P. Houck and M. Matham

¹³ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for Current Season," *Sweet Briar News*, 19, October 1933, 1

¹⁴ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Programs for Current Season," 1

to use it to receive medical care to avoid another medical crisis. Despite the dire medical conditions of the children, the programs the Sweet Briar students had initiated in prior years, continued. They taught the children cooperative games¹⁵, and were very focused on their upcoming Thanksgiving play, a tradition at the mission school. They started new health campaign, which rewarded those students who were in good health¹⁶.

The Great Depression, which had begun in 1929, just before the mission burned down, contributed to the bad conditions at the mission. In addition, when the mission burned, the Sweet Briar students stopped coming, and things got much worse for the people of the mission. Thus, the people of the mission needed many basic items to help them get by. So the YWCA published a notice in the *Sweet Briar News*, asking the students to donate any old clothes that they did not need so that the mothers of the mission could rework them to fit the children¹⁷. They also asked for any old magazines or books for the children, because they used them to teach the children their letters and simple words¹⁸. In fact, during the 1933-1934 school year and the year following, the YWCA made many pleas to the campus for help with the visits or donate needed items. One can presume that the reason for this is that in the three years the students were away from the mission, those who had previously done the work had graduated, or simply left. It has to be wondered why they had such a hard time rallying up volunteers. One reason could be because of the Depression, when people were focused solely on getting themselves through the rough patch. Another reason could be that this generation of

¹⁵ "With the Briarite of 5 Years Ago," *Sweet Briar News*, 28 September 1933, 2

¹⁶ "Help the YWCA," *Sweet Briar News*, 23 November, 1933, 2

¹⁷ "Help the YWCA," 2

¹⁸ "Help the YWCA," 2

students was less willing to step outside the social norms and assist those of other races.

Either reason could be true; there is no evidence to suggest why the YWCA had such a hard time getting the help it needed, but the students of Sweet Briar stepped up to the occasion once again, and by 1935, there were no more editorial pleas from the YWCA in the *Sweet Briar News*.

The work continued at the mission until the 1960s, at which point it was known as St. Paul's Mission. It is in the 1960s that all mention of the YWCA disappears and it appears that this is about the time that the YWCA was losing strength nationwide, as was religion, and it was becoming less and less influential in the community. However, the work done at the mission over the years was the very beginning of Sweet Briar's abandonment of societal ideals and roles.

The work at the mission, however, was only one way that the students of Sweet Briar College ignored the racial tensions of the community. In 1933, when they were re-starting their work at the Indian mission, they were also trying out new programs elsewhere in the community. Because of the Jim Crow laws that were in place until the 1960s, the Indians were not the only ones discriminated against; the African Americans of the south were also highly discriminated against, and their schools and students were in just as much need as the mission school. So in the fall of 1933, the YWCA implemented a new program at the Clifford School, an African American school in nearby Clifford that needed help. The program at the Clifford School was modeled after the program at the Indian mission. The Sweet Briar students visited the school once a

week to teach and help like they did at the mission school¹⁹. The one major difference, however, was the curriculum at the Clifford School as opposed to the mission school. At the Clifford School, they taught the students the value of cleanliness by helping them to build model villages out of paper²⁰. They also hoped to help the students clean up their school inside and out by planting flowers around their school and fixing up the inside²¹. This was just the plan for the very beginning of the program, and the Sweet Briar students expressed a wish to expand the traveling library to include the Clifford School, and if the program was successful, to expand it to other African American schools in the area, such as Coolwell, and Bolding Hill²².

Once the program was begun in 1933, it took off with many additions and changes. By the 1934-1935 school year, the program had not yet expanded to any of the other schools, as they had hoped, but it was growing and a committee had been organized to oversee it. In the student handbook that year, under the YWCA committees, there was a "Committee on Activities for Colored People"²³, that was focused mostly on the work done at Clifford School. This committee was responsible for providing the school with the materials they needed to get through the year, and other things that they did not need, but that enriched the learning experience. For example, they provided the school with colored paper, something that was considered a luxury at the time, and a traveling library.

The Sweet Briar students also visited the school, played games with the children, and

¹⁹ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for current Season," *Sweet Briar News*, 19 October 1933, 1.

²⁰ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for Current Season," 1.

²¹ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for Current Season," 1

²² "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for Current Season," 1

²³ Ed. Sweet Briar Student Associations, *Student Handbook 1934-1935*, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

held Christmas and Easter parties to give them a time to celebrate in the Depression world²⁴. They had a growing list of schools that they wanted to help, allowing them to expand their program, to include the Pleasant Grove School, the Coolwell School, and Bolding Hill School, all African American schools in the area²⁵.

The work done by the "Committee on Activities for Colored People" not only included the work at the school, but also work within the African American community as a whole. Every year at Sweet Briar there was a day when the residents of Amherst County came to the Sweet Briar Campus, to participate in fair type events and contests. This annual event was known as Amherst County Day, and was enjoyed by all the participants, and continued into the 1970s. In 1934, however, the YWCA committee organized and held a Jubilee for the African American children of the schools and their families, in their own Amherst County Day²⁶. The activities included a baby contest with prizes, prizes for outstanding schoolwork, the best 4-H work, and the usual fair games²⁷. They had hoped that this Jubilee would continue to grow and become equivalent to Amherst County Day, but there are no records of other Jubilees, so it can only be assumed, that although it was successful that year, it did not continue for unknown reasons.

By the 1936 school year, the work by the Sweet Briar students had expanded to some of the other African American schools, and there was a set program in place, that

²⁴ 1934-1935 Handbook

²⁵ "Sweet Briar YW Announces Program for Current Season," 1 and 1934-1935 Handbook

²⁶ "YW Holds Jubilee for Colored Schools: 1st Meeting resembles Amherst County Day: Baby Clinic Held," *Sweet Briar News*, 17 May 1934, 1.

²⁷ "YW Holds Jubilee for Colored Schools: 1st Meeting Resembles Amherst County Day: Baby Clinic Held," 1.

was very similar to the work at the mission school. Every Friday the students visited the mission school, and every Wednesday, there were separate groups who went to the various schools to teach the children cooperative games, and other skills, such as teaching the girls some skills of the finer side of life, such as how to make party favors and embroidery²⁸. The Sweet Briar students taught them skills that they believed the children would find enjoyable, and still learn something from.

The work at the African American schools continued as long as the work at the mission school, into the 1960s. During that time, they extended the program begun originally at the Clifford School, to all the other schools mentioned before, plus others. The program became very large and almost surpassed their original program at the Indian mission. The work done at these schools is another step by the students of Sweet Briar to abandon the pedestal idea of the sheltered woman and go outside to experience the real world.

Despite the fact that McCandless states that many southern women's colleges believed in nurturing a good social experience rather than giving the young women a stimulating intellectual environment, this was not true at Sweet Briar College²⁹. For years the YWCA had given opportunities to the maids who worked in the Sweet Briar refectory, including special chapel services for them after the Sunday evening dinner, and providing them with various forms of entertainment to help them forget about their work. However, in the 1930s, the YWCA began doing more with the maids of the college. They began teaching them in academic work and holding regular classes throughout the week.

²⁸ Bulletin of Sweet Briar College: Student Activities, April 1936, Volume XIX, No. 2, Sweet Briar College Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

²⁹ McCandless

In 1933, the classes included drama, sewing, and English³⁰. The drama class was focused on a play that they prepared to perform in front of the entire Sweet Briar community, just like a play put on by the Sweet Briar drama students³¹. In the sewing classes, they were focused on making pillows and other items that could be used to make the maid's rooms more comfortable and homey; and in the English classes, they studied literature and grammar³². By the next year, they expanded the class subjects so that it resembled the average elementary school curriculum of today. According to the *Sweet Briar News*, the YWCA taught classes in elementary science and math, ancient history, literature, spelling, knitting, and current events³³. The YWCA even began organizing extracurricular activities similar to those that the students of the college participated in. They also organized a glee club that would sing at the weekly chapel services, and a basketball team for physical education and to encourage some healthy competitiveness³⁴.

The YWCA's work with the maids revealed to the students a different aspect of working life. They saw how hard it was for the maids who worked in the refectory, and how much their education was lacking in the basics, compared to the Sweet Briar students' educations. They were once again willing to go beyond the social norms of the time and help others whom the rest of society did not appear to care about.

The students of Sweet Briar College showed through their community service, and willingness to help anyone that they were anything but sheltered. It also shows that

³⁰ "Nancy Butzner Heads Committee for Maids," *Sweet Briar News*, 26 October 1933.

³¹ "Nancy Butzner Heads Committee for Maids,"

³² "Nancy Butzner Heads Committee for Maids,"

³³ "Committee of YWCA Organized by R. Young '35," *Sweet Briar News*, 8 November 1934.

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they did not care about the racial exclusions and were willing to help anyone who needed or wanted it. In Central Virginia, racial tensions between the whites and other races lasted into the civil rights movement during the 1960s, and in the case of the Monocans, the tensions still persist today. Regardless, the Sweet Briar students of the YWCA were willing to go outside these racial tensions and work with those who society ignored, the Monocans and the African Americans of the area. They committed themselves to these projects and the children and the communities greatly appreciated the attention they received from the Sweet Briar students, who learned a lot from these experiences. And the Monocans and the African American students benefited from it as well, because someone cared about them enough to make the trip out once a week to play and teach them things that they otherwise might not have been exposed to.

The work done by the YWCA with the maids is no different. They were once again reaching out to a group whose needs were generally ignored, but the student's work had a different purpose. While the work done with the maids was in part to help them feel included in the Sweet Briar community, it was also to expose them to the academic world of the college, which they would not have otherwise experienced. This further dispels McCandless' idea that the administrators of the southern women's colleges were more concerned with fostering a healthy social environment for proper young ladies, rather than a stimulating intellectual one. If the administration of Sweet Briar had been more concerned with social norms, the students of the college might not have taken it upon themselves to teach a group the basics of academics to help them understand the world better.

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Even though McCandless claims that Southern women's colleges were "behind the times" it is clear that the statement should not be applied to Sweet Briar College. Sweet Briar students have shown from the beginning that they are serious about the academic life of the college, and are committed to a path of service to others, even when society does not see that those being helped are worthy of the attention. This legacy has served the college well, and they were in fact ahead of the popular Southern thinking, but that did not stop them.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

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The Briar Patch was first put out by the Junior class in 1910. It includes the names and pictures of all the students in each class, stories about their college life, and information on the clubs and organizations current during that year. For the clubs and organizations it not only gives the picture and names of the students involved, but also gives a brief description of what was done that year, and there is usually a story written by a student, of what they enjoyed about the organization that year.

The Sweet Briar News. 1927-1998. Sweet Briar College

The *Sweet Briar News* gives information to the students and faculty of the college on the events taking place on an around campus. It gives surprisingly detailed information on many of the activities done by the students or clubs and organizations. It also gives information on what will happen in the near future, and at the end of the year prints a "Freshman version" of the paper to recap everything that was done throughout the year to let the incoming freshman know what they are expected to do and what was done in the past.

Bulletin of Sweet Briar College: Student Activities. 1910-c.1960.

The Student Activities Bulletins give information on exactly what the name suggests; the student activities. Each organization has its own section with a description of what the

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organization had done during that school year. It gives great detail of the work done so that the incoming students can see what has been done in the past and what they are expected to live up to in a way; it is also a resource for the returning students so they can see what the other organizations did and whether or not they want to become involved in new organizations.

Student Handbook 1906 to present. Sweet Briar College

The student handbooks include information for students on everything they need to know as a student of the college; such as what to do when you move in, the procedures for signing up for classes, leaving and returning from breaks, and related information needed to survive as a resident and student of the college. There is also information in the student handbooks on the three biggest organizations at the college; the Student Government Association (SGA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and the Athletic Association (AA). For each of these organizations, it gives accounts of what was done in the previous year, who the officers are, the various committees, and so on.

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Warwick Publishing House, 1933. Found at

<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/collections/indianisland.html>.

This book, found on the University of Virginia website, gives details about the Moncoan Indians in Amherst County, the same Monocans who are visited by the students of Sweet Briar College. It gives information on the mission that is not found anywhere in the archives of Sweet Briar. It tells about the founding of the mission by Reverend Gray, and gives more details of the burning of the mission in 1930, that affected the work of Sweet Briar there.

McCandless, Amy T. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940." *History of Higher Education Annual*, vol. 7. (1987). 45-67.

During the period between the world wars, society put the young, southern, college woman on a pedestal, still hoping to keep up the image of the southern belle. In 1930, 75% of the women attending colleges in Virginia attended women's colleges. At these women's colleges, as opposed to the eastern schools, rules were placed on the students that dictated their dress, actions, and even attendance at religious activities. Because of the threats in the 1930s of social, economic, and political decline, the southerners clung to the images of civility and grace they knew by implementing these rules.